Playa Lingo: the lexicon of Black Rock City

Floater
A person who takes this year's Burning Man theme *way* too seriously.
We had our theme camp all set up, and then that floater dude had to get all super critical because we're not doing something nautical.

Fucko
Moniker used by Burners and/or Gigsvillians to refer to fellow denizens of Gigsville.
Those fuckos over in Gigsville throw one hell of a mean Carbeque!

Geek-banding
Trading infomation and relaying messages over walkie-talkies.
The crowd's small on this side right now, but there's lots of people geek-banding out the 20 so you better get your ass over here quick... over.

The Hat
Also known as Larry Harvey.
Have you seen The Hat lately? Last I saw, he was zooming off in his golf cart to yet another meeting.

Newbie roadblock
Badly parked bicycles that impede the regular flow of foot traffic.
If you don't want me walkin' over your Newbie roadblock why did you set it up in the middle of this fucking path?

Playa brain
Malady afflicting your short-term memory.
Ak! Playa brain! Where the fuck are my keys?

Playa droppings
Clumps of playa that fall off and litter Highway 447 from departing vehicles.
Fasten your seatbelts, kids! It's going to be a bumpy ride with all these playa droppings!

Playa dust
Trace condiment in your food. Gets into and onto everything and *won't go away.*
I've still got playa dust in my boots from last year!

Playa hair
Playa dust + sun + sweat + lack of regular showers = playa hair. Gives you a hold that makes Paul Mitchell green with envy.
I look like an untamed wild child with my crazy playa hair!

Playa Hate-ta
Those slick, tough urbanites who transmogrify into whiny, cowering turds the moment they set foot on the playa.
Those Playa Hate-tas from NYC went and hid in their rental RV every time the wind kicked up.

Playa platforms
What you get when an inch or more of playa mud accumulates on the soles of your shoes.
Damn! Another inch of this rain and it's playa platforms for all of us!

Playa pounder
The cheap, crappy bike you bring to get around Black Rock City. It won't shift gears and you wouldn't miss it if somebody stole it.
Sure, I wrecked my bike going over that makeshift ramp someone made out on the playa, but whatever, it's just a playa pounder.

Playa shuffle
Addled, vacant stare and trudging walk exhibited by Burners finding their way back to camp after being up all day and night, partying and dancing.
Did you see Mark come back to camp this morning? He was doing the playa shuffle, then headed straight for his tent.

Yahoo
Any non-participatory person in Black Rock City, such as someone taking photos without permission.
I like it here better earlier in the week, before all the Yahoos start showing up near the weekend.

Vapor camp
The empty space of a theme camp whose organizers wuss out after reserving their real estate for the week.
Our camp had a pretty small space, so we took over the vapor camp next to us.

Whuttayagot
An annoying barterer who doesn't get the concept of a gift economy. Won't give anything without an even exchange. Doesn't use hard cash, but might as well.
That damn Greeter was a fuckin' Whuttayagot! He wouldn't give me a map unless I gave him a beer!

— complied by Sage Collins, Penfold, Rev. Blind Toaster, and Bryan Finch

We built this city

A kinder, gentler DPW builds Black Rock City

by ADRIAN ROBERTS

Will Roger, Flynn Mauthe, and Ada Chester at the DPW work ranch last July
Adrian Roberts

cover story

Anytime you read something about Burning Man, it seems like Larry Harvey always gets all the props. He's the one the media goes to first for juicy sound bites about the event. He's the one who get all the press – although admittedly, he *did* start this whole mess.

It's one thing to dream up Black Rock City. It's another to actually build it. Who *are* these people who come to the Black Rock Desert months ahead of time to create a city out of nothing – then remove it like it never existed?

These people are the Black Rock City Department of Public Works (DPW), and they work their asses off just so you people can have a pretend city to come party in for a week.

This past July 4th weekend, *Piss Clear,* consisting of myself and the Mysterious D, drove up to the DPW work ranch, aka Black Rock Station, about 25 miles north of Gerlach. There, we got to hang out with the crew, including Bubblegeek, who gave us a tour of the property – all 280 acres of it. (The old "80 Acres" is leased land. The Burning Man organization recently purchased another 200 acres.)

We also sat down and chatted with DPW Chief of Staff **Will Roger** (aka Kapt. Klean), along with Operations Director **Flynn Mauthe** and Operations Manager **Ada Chester**. Each have been with the Burning Man organization for a number of years, the longest being Will, who was first introduced to Burning Man by his girlfriend, Crimson Rose, back in 1993.

In the beginning, Will helped plan the survey and roads with John Law, one of the original BM organizers. In 1997, after John quit, Larry asked Will if he would run the Nevada operations, and the rest, as they say, is history.

Flynn came to Burning Man by way of Survival Research Labs and another robotic group, the Seemen, back in '95. He, too, worked with John Law, and built the Helco tower in 1996. He's been working for "the Man" ever since.

Ada has the most interesting "how I discovered Burning Man" story: After graduating from college in 1998, she visited an art car friend in New Orleans, who had a big pile of flyers in his house. She reached in, grabbed one, and it was a Burning Man newsletter. In it, She saw a tiny listing that said, "DPW: We need carpenters, welders, etc." She had never heard of BM, but it sounded interesting. She went back to Austin, assembled a crew, and arrived at the DPW work ranch. At first, Flynn turned them away. But they were determined to work whether he liked it or She's been with the DPW ever since.

PC: *Will and Flynn, you both got more involved with Burning Man after John Law quit. Why do you think he left?*

WILL: I don't think he could see himself working anything that would grow any larger. He thought it had gotten big enough.

PC: *And you wanted to help make Burning Man bigger?*

WILL: I thought it would be cool! Back then, people were already saying, "This thing changed my life." So why not change a whole bunch of lives, y'know? It needed to go on – it was an important week in a lot of lives, including my own.

PC: *How do you get people to come out here to do such hard work?*

WILL: Let me give you a little history. It used be that we were always undermanned. We would make appeals on the internet, the phones, anything to get people to come out here and work with us. We didn't have much to offer. It was food and a bad time, usually. We didn't even have porta-potties for the first three years.

Then we got a few regular people coming back – mostly circus people. These are hardcore people. I love them. They're not afraid of hard work. They can put up a tent, do funky carpentry, even wire your house for you ... *all wrong,* but they can do it.

And that's who we relied upon. There was a circus from New Orleans and one from Minneapolis. And then *they* started bringing in more people. We had an open door policy, and last year, for the first time, we had enough people – in fact, we had *too* many people.

I mean, we pay pretty good money here, if you consider there's no overhead. You're not paying for rent or restaurants or movies. We provide beer, food, a place to take a crap, and – this year –pretty much everybody sleeps in a trailer. All of a sudden, $50 a day is looking pretty good.

This year, for the first time, we're choosing the people we want. And with this, we can eliminate the people who have caused problems in the past. The whiners, the cry-babies, the junkies...

FLYNN: It's going to be very sad in a lot of cases. Because some people have always shown up, and we've always fit them in. Last year, we had 259 people by August 23 – that was our role call that morning. We had to know who was here and what they were doing – and we realized some people were taking advantage of the situation.

This year, the department managers gave us a list – they picked their people. So as Operations Director, I'm not hiring anybody. What's even sadder is we have a waiting list of volunteers. Any given day, we're running about 40-45 volunteers. All you have to do is work two weeks, and you get a ticket and a t-shirt. Most of them will leave after two weeks, but a lot of them stay on – and it's a big job juggling that.

"There's no manual on this. You can't go to the library and check out a book on how to build a city for 30,000 people on public land in two weeks – and then clean it up with no trace."

WILL: With the staff and crew, it's about 95 paid people total, and about 45 volunteers, to make it 140.

PC: *The DPW used to be all volunteer, didn't it?*

FLYNN: It was all volunteers until '99. That was the first year we actually started paying the crew. And every job that we delegate is a job that one of us three have personally done ourselves. That makes a big difference. Because it's hard to go tell someone to put up a fence if you've never done it.

PC: *What kind of person comes to work for the DPW?*

WILL: We don't know! We have people out here who often won't tell you what their skills are. We try to find out from the forms.

Let me tell you a funny story. We had a guy named George Bush last year. Everybody loved George. He was one of the heroes. He came up to get dirty and pound things. Over the winter we find out that he runs a big corporation in Chicago, wears a suit everyday, and is worth 75 million dollars!

PC: *Looking around, it seems like you run a pretty big operation here.*

WILL: Six thousand T-stakes, ten miles of fence, acres and acres of shade. The café building – is a unique design, nothing like it in the world – is bigger than the Coliseum in Rome. It's got over a mile of wired roping. It's remarkable.

PC: *There's this huge infrastructure, yet the DPW seems to have a fairly loose organization – or am I wrong here?*

FLYNN: I would brag that we are the tightest department in the Burning Man organization. We're the only ones who have meetings every morning. By the time the rest of the world wakes up in San Francisco, we've already knocked out a half day of work. So I don't know how exactly you mean 'loose.'

PC: *Well, it doesn't seem like a normal company job. There may be a "boss" telling people what to do, but it seems a lot friendlier and laid-back, like everybody's working together. There's a hierarchy, but it doesn't seem so rigid, like in the normal world.*

WILL: We're one of the unusual companies that works by consensus. I used to run everything out here like a dictator, and I'm kind of embarrassed by it now. This year, I'm trying to rely on the people around me that can more than do their job. I've always felt the burden because I didn't trust anybody – and now I'm trusting *everybody.* And I think everyone notices the difference. I mean, I've got a bad reputation!

PC: *So we've heard!*

ADA: The way that everything's going this year, people are taking ownership of what they're doing. They get to do it and be proud of it, and not worry about being micromanaged.

PC: *If I told you the DPW work ranch seemed like summer camp for freaks, what would you say?*

WILL: Probably about right! There are people here from all over – New York City, Seattle, the Bay Area, L.A.

On the other hand, it *is* a labor camp. We *do* work hard. The days are long. In the heat of the season, it's a 12-hour day. And some of the guys work longer than that. Some of the projects we do are real miracles that happen in a short amount of time – the base of the Man, for example. I don't know how they do it. They get two weeks to put up a four-story building to code. Do *that* in a community somewhere else!

PC: *Some BM old-timers – the ones who pine for the early days, back in the early-'90s – are probably annoyed that the Burning Man organization now pays people, and is buying land and equipment. They'd rather it be more DIY, in order to have lower ticket prices.*

FLYNN: Oh yeah, the good old days, where people shit on the playa and left a big fucking mess. Look, I'm all into the wild shit that used to happen in the old days. But if you're standing there and a bomb goes off too close...

WILL: Or you get decapitated by a car on your motorcycle – which happened... or you get a car running over your tent – which happened... then *those* are the good old days? Oh, I think those are the *bad old days!*

Over time, the anarchist thing had to be removed. Because we were visible. We had to pay taxes. We had to pay our bills. And when you pay bills, that means you have to have an accounting office. All of a sudden, it's a real business. It's not anarchist anymore. If those guys want to experience that, they can go to a Rainbow Gathering.

PC: *One complaint that's often heard is that the ticket prices are now so high.*

WILL: I think it's the best deal on the planet.

PC: *Some would disagree, since you have to bring all your own stuff, and still pay $200.*

WILL: Well, they should bring their own porta-potty then!

PC: *Would you say that clean-up is the worst part about working for the DPW?*

FLYNN: Clean-up is probably the most strict time of the event. We have no days off. There's nothing fun about it. Everybody's gone home, and people get a bit disgruntled because of the mess that's been left. You can say "Leave No Trace" all day long, but they leave, and there's trace. Morale goes down a bit, so we do our best to try to make it fun.

PC: *It seems as if the DPW has a real chip on its shoulder regarding the citizens of Black Rock City. You guys definitely have a bad-ass reputation.*

ADA: We don't *want* that attitude, but we can't help it – especially with the Newbies here. Some of us have been out here for months. We're used to living in the desert, we're self-sufficient. And we've been working to make this event happen. Then everybody comes in – we're used to 200 people, and all of a sudden, it's 25,000 people. It's overwhelming.

FLYNN: It's not on purpose, but I think the people that *are* drawn out here *do* have a lot of attitude. It started out as "DPW against the Rangers." We corrected that. Then it just became DPW, "the renegade anarchists who fuck shit up." We don't like that shit! We want to be the guys with the white hats!

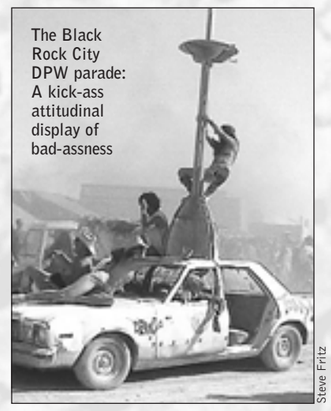
ADA: A kinder, gentler DPW!

WILL: Were we drunk in the past? Yeah. Did we take too many drugs? Yeah, we've done that. We've broken all the rules. But this year, we've eliminated most of those people. We're being tighter with the rules.

We had a staff member, a café volunteer, die last year. He fell out of a truck and got crushed by a trailer. It was an unsafe load, he was riding in the back, unprotected, not seatbelted into a chair. He was offered all that, but he decided not to.

So now we have a very cool safety program – and not just because of that, but because we needed it. We're trying to be a much kinder, gentler, more focused, more open, more community-oriented department. That's my goal. And I think we all need to work towards that.

A pile of plastic orange trash fencing – all ten miles of it – at the DPW work ranch
Adrian Roberts


The Black Rock City DPW parade: A kick-ass attitudinal display of bad-assness
Steve Fritz

PC: *How much money does it take to build Black Rock City?*

WILL: My particular budget is a little over a million dollars. But that's a year-round budget that also funds the caretakers here in the wintertime, food year-round, travel expenses, fleet expenses. I mean, our porta-potty bill is over $300,000. Burning Man isn't a non-profit, it's a no-profit. What we do is spend all our money every year putting on an event.

PC: *Do you ever step back and just gaze in shock at how big it's all gotten?*

WILL: I've done that a lot lately. We started in tents up here. Flynn and I came up with the name "DPW" by sitting around the campfire one night. We said, "We've got to organize this. Why are we burning everything after the event? Wouldn't clean-up be easier if we didn't make a big burn scar? Why don't we store things here and use them next year?" So we made our first depot a couple of ranches over. Then we eventually leased the property here.

PC: *When we were getting the tour of the DPW ranch, it seems like everyone kinda has their own little dominions.*

FLYNN: It probably looks a lot like Black Rock City did in the old days. In the certain light of sunset, it looks like there's a festival going on out here – especially when we're ramped up in August.

WILL: Yeah, we've got the café, we've got porta-potties, little individual camps that people take pride in. Not only has there been progress with the actual, physical part of it, but the *real* progress has been what Flynn and Ada and I have learned about managing this thing. There's no manual on this. You can't go to the library and check out a book on how to build a city for 30,000 people on public land in two weeks – and then clean it up with no trace.

If you think about it, it's a miracle. And we know how to manage that! We actually write the stipulations for the BLM. We tell them how we're going to do it, and they're glad that we do! We wrote the first environmental assessment. We set the standard for clean-up. We know how to build structures that can withstand 100 mph winds. We know how to deal with all that. It's not something we went to school for. I've got four college degrees and spent twenty years in university, and nothing that I learned there – *nothing* – prepared me for *this!*

And that's why I like it. It's a new challenge every year.

— complied by Penfold, Rev. Blind Toaster and Dr. Lizard

WHAT'S OUT	WHAT'S IN
chill-out domes	opium dens
cowboy hats	pith helmets
creepy stalker guys	self-defense
Critical Tits	random naked guys
devil horns	EL wire halos
drugs	different drugs
dust	mud
extravagance	austerity
Floating World theme	not having a theme
greeting	working in the café
hard currency	hard liquor
iPods	vinyl
oceans	clouds
old-timers	virgins (yum!)
pirates	unrepentant sodomites
plans and control	dancing
playa names	real names
public sex	public humiliation
Black Rock Rangers	DPW
real feathers	hair shirts
spectacle	intimacy
vacation time	unemployment
walkie-talkies	police scanners
weddings on the playa	divorces on the playa

— compiled by Bryan Finch, Dr. Lizard, Malderor, Playa Kitten, and Adrian Roberts

Recollections of a burning minstrel

by EASTSIDE CHUCK, FUNK CAMP

musings

Logically, the Black Rock Desert is no place for a working musician. The alkali dust eats away at a saxophone's pads. Rampant dehydration makes it hard for a flutist to work his lips. And incessant, bland, trance techno threatens to wipe away any sounds an aspiring playa minstrel attempts to contribute to the gift economy.

However despite all this, I just may be the hardest working saxophone player in this here mandala of a village known as Black Rock City.

I've played odd-metered rock sets in state-of-the-art large-scale sound tents, only to wake up the next day to help tear the tents down before the desert wind did it for us.

I've sat in the shelter of a large aqua-green RV with a bunch of colleagues, drunkenly hammering out oddly-instrumented versions of "Crazy Train."

I've loaded up a Radio Flyer wagon with weird percussion and, with some friends, played half-forgotten circus bluegrass tunes, commando-style, all over the playa in the rain, till the mud encrusted wheels couldn't roll any longer, and our instruments became so moist that we couldn't make them work anymore. I'm fairly sure lost my fucking mind with joy.

I realized my true role in the Burning Man ethos way back in '00 when I first heard the rolling funk coming toward me through the glint of sequins and disco balls. My bandmate Minky and I remembered somewhere in the back of our disoriented brains that we had been invited to jump up on something called the Funkmobile, to sit in for a couple of tunes. Sure, what the hell! As I crawled up on the flatbed to the opening strains of Michael Jackson's "Don't Stop Till You Get Enough," I locked eyes with EZ, one of the original Funkettes. She had the look of someone who's been driving around this desert for as long as the millions of years it's been here. We jammed with the rolling funk unit, then hopped off so we could scurry back to the Center Camp Café to play our set of Eastern European French gypsy jazz for the strung out, coffee sippin' Burners.

It was last year's Burn where I realized I was actually gigging on a regular basis. The Funkmobile played a wedding gig at the Chapel in exchange for some plywood. We were two hours late, but we played the gig anyway. It's playa time, right? The presiding authority requested that we hold the music to a low volume so that the happy couple could hear the vows. When the dusty ceremony was over, we played "Let's Get It On" by Marvin Gaye.

I had a wild sort of bread-and-butter gig as a quasi-regular house band member at the Acid Cabaret, backing up Oi Goons as the wind howled outside. It was a hellishly fun quagmire.

I also played a jazz trio gig at the Dice Club on Burn Night. We showed up with heads full of whatever, slugged down some absinthe, told the pie-eyed band struggling to play jazz standards to hit the highway, and launched into a windy, dusty version of the Police's "Walking On The Moon."

Every year, when I return to the world, confused, dirty, and fizzle-fried, I take my dust-encrusted instruments to the repair shop to make sure they still function. The instrument man's eyes widen when he sees them.

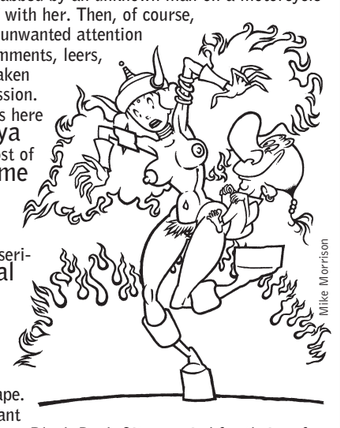
"What happened to these axes?" he wonders aloud. "What happens out there?" I wish I could accurately sum it up for him. But I reckon, my fellow citizens, that that is our little secret.

Playa Babe Survival Guide

by PINKY

Black Rock City. You may feel a great sense of freedom here, especially from the cultural rules that bind us in our normal society. But while Burning Man is not "real life," the real world *does* filter in – especially concerning the treatment of women.

At a recent camp meeting, a group of women compared notes on some unsettling playa experiences. A wide variety of stories surfaced: a man attempted to drag a woman off on the open playa until her friends came to her rescue; breasts were grabbed by a stranger; a woman was grabbed by an unknown man on a motorcycle who sped off with her. Then, of course, there's all the unwanted attention – sexual comments, leers, photographs taken without permission.


Mike Morrison

Most of us here leave the playa unharmed. Most of us have the time of our lives. However, Burning Man *does* have the serious potential for danger – especially for women – including harassment, assault, and rape.

We don't want people to come to Black Rock City worried for their safety. And we don't want people to dress more conservatively or change sexual names for camps and events, either. What we're looking for are solutions to sexual harassment, and for potential harassers to behave responsibly.

Most of all, we demand action for inappropriate behavior – especially with all the police presence here. We want to know they're here to help. If they're going to fine people for lighting up a joint, they might as well ticket and fine sexual harassers as well – or eject them from the event altogether.

Here are some basic safety tips:

The rules in Black Rock City may be different than in real life, but you should still use common sense and street smarts when evaluating situations. Human nature does not intrinsically change once we hit the playa.

Be more careful Thursday through Sunday. That's when more people start showing up – they can be more anonymous, and get away with more.

Be naked, be free. But realize that you risk ending up on the internet or in a *Girls Gone Wild* video.

Don't take candy from strangers. Know what drugs you are taking and who is giving them to you.

Be aware of the effects of different drug combinations. For example, don't mix GHB with alcohol – *duh!*

When tripping, have a check-in person or a playa buddy – especially if you're wandering around at night. If your judgment is impaired, do it with a friend.

Carry something that doubles as a weapon, like a large Maglite. There may not be people around to help if you travel alone on the open playa at night.

Burning Man is the perfect venue for public humiliation. If someone is harassing you, confront them, and get other people involved.

Burning Man is also incredibly supportive. If you need support, chances are all you have to do is ask for it.

Help someone who looks like they are receiving unwanted attention.

Call attention to your plight. Be loud. Make a scene. Call a Ranger. There are three main Ranger stations: one at Center Camp, and two on opposite ends of the city. They can also be reached on CB channel 9.

Don't be afraid to veer from the Burning Man spirit and tell someone to fuck off. Who cares if someone thinks you're uptight or rude when defining your boundaries?

For potential harassers:

Ask permission to take photos. Let people know your intent for photos and video images.

Ask permission before you touch another person. Treat people with respect. Just because a person is naked or wearing revealing clothes doesn't mean they are up for grabs.

Don't stare or gawk. Participate.

The main issue is consent. Ask yourself, is this behavior consensual? Did this person agree to do this? Is this person sober enough to give consent?

Welcome to the playa. Be nice. Be safe. Have fun!

I remember when...

... at Camp Atari someone found the secret hidden room in Atari 2600 Adventure.

... Disgruntled Postal Workers could brandish *unloaded* firearms.

... the *Black Rock Gazette* seemed like competition.

... the BMorg didn't send out e-mails saying "Welcome home!" like some kind of Rainbow brother.

... the gas cost more than the ticket.

... the Greeters were not freaks.

... the Man stood on the ground like us mere mortals.

... the Man was just a little spark.

... the One Tree.

... the street names in Black Rock City were easy to remember.

... there were communal mud baths and communal soaking pools.

... there were no rules.

... tickets were less than $75.

... we brought liquor and pineapples to the free bars, and powered the blenders with bicycles.

... we didn't even dress up.

... you could burn stuff.

... you could count on nobody doing anything stupid. Dangerous, sure, but not stupid.

... you could cross the entire encampment on foot, without having to refill your water bottle.

... you could drive as fast you wanted.

... you could go to the New Gerlach Hot Springs and take showers during the event.

... you could stand directly beneath the Man without having to do a Silly Walk to get there.

... you didn't have to fill out a lengthy questionnaire and submit a drawing to get your theme camp registered.

... your neighbors watched your stuff for you instead of stealing it.

– compiled by Rev. Blind Toaster, Caution Mike, Dr. Lizard, Lenny Jones, Penfold, Adrian Roberts

Rumor mill

John Law has returned to a supervisory role in the Burning Man organization. He will be heading up the super-elite commando wing of the Black Rock Rangers, known as the Black Berets. Word is they will be even more fully armed than in 1996. Their motto is "Take back Burning Man" and we're pretty sure this has absolutely nothing to do with the increased police presence seen in recent years. Also, he has presided over a cash infusion to the DPW so that "more public pyrotechnics" can be installed throughout the city. Tread lightly, folks – you never know when those suckers are going to go off.

All the ice sold this year is dosed.

George W.'s daughters are gonna be here for the booze, drugs, and tawdry sex.

Gigsville will Borg-like assimilate the camps formerly affiliated with the Blue Light District.

Gigsville's "Fuck Off Ranger" cards were printed with LSD-dosed ink.

Jim Thomas quit the Mermen in the middle of the week over "musical differences." They will be replacing him with the violinist from Beyond Race. The pre-Burn performance will proceed as planned, except they will add some Idiot Flesh covers.

Larry secretly works for the BLM.

Last year's *Black Rock Gazette* Playa Iron Chef contest was rigged.

Real human liver will be served at the Donner Tea Party with fava beans and some nice Chianti.

Sister Dan Van Iquity is a guy.

NASA is investigating whether the Black Rock Desert can be used to land space shuttles. A test landing had been scheduled for this week, necessitating the cancellation of Burning Man; fortunately, the BLM interceded on our behalf and convinced them to move it. Last we heard, the landing has been rescheduled for the following week, so those of you who stick around after Monday morning might want to check it out. We're sure you can find something to do.

— complied by Penfold, Rev. Blind Toaster and Dr. Lizard